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CHAPTER V

THE SACRED DANCES

General Features

In the Gros Ventre public cult, as contrasted with more or less private cult concepts and observances, next after the sacred Pipe ceremonies, in order of rank and importance in the native view, were the Sacred Dances or Lodges,—the terms are used interchangeably, and while etymologically "Lodge" is correct, our informants preferred usually "Dance."

There were eight of these Sacred Dances: the Sacrifice Dance (commonly but incorrectly called the Sun Dance), the "Law Enforcers" or Old Man's Dance, the Drum Dance, the Kit-Fox Dance, the Dog Dance, the Crazy Dance, the Fly Dance, and the Old Women's Dance.[1] Of these eight, the Sacrifice Dance was more generally regarded as the "greatest," ranking first in order of importance and dignity, but somewhat outside of the others which have been mentioned in descending order. All eight were regarded as sacred rites, not merely social or good-time occasions, although such elements entered into them or were associated with them.

Ordinarily a person participated in or vowed during his life first the Fly Dance; only after this the Crazy, Kit-fox, Dog, Drum and Sacrifice Dances, and finally the Old Man's Dance.

Our chief informants on the Sacred Dances were The Boy, Turn Toes, Thick, Charles Buckman, Coming Daylight, and Singer. Lame Bull, from whom The Boy got most of his information on the Dances, had gone through all of them except the Drum Dance. He had even been selected as one of the two outstanding

[1] Kroeber, 1908, pp. 227-268, gives an excellent account of these Dances, gotten at a time, nearly half a century ago, when tribal memory was fresher Our data may help to fill out some of the picture.

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the one who introduced the Sacrifice Dance among the Gros Ventre people."

Although in the origin story, it was the chief buffalo who promised to give aid to those who would perform the Sacrifice Dance, actually the chief buffalo was not prayed to during it, nor was the sun or any other being except the Supreme Being and Bha'a. Our chief informants have considerable knowledge of the Piegan (Blackfoot), Assiniboine and Crow Sun Dances, and emphasized various important differences, as they understood them, between these dances and their own Sacrifice Dance. "These sacrifices [in the Sacrifice Dance]," Al Chandler remarked, "were made to God, not to the Sun. I have always wondered why people call our Sacrifice Dance the Sun Dance. Anything the Blackfeet cannot understand they call the Sun and think he must be something." According to The Boy and Thick, while the Blackfeet pray to the Sun and while the Assiniboine in their Sun Dance pray and sing to the Thunder Bird (corresponding to the Gros Ventre Bha'a), the Gros Ventres in their own Sacrifice Dance prayed chiefly to Ixtcibani:hohat, secondarily, as will be explained later, to Bha'a, and with some incidental mention of or appeal to the Four Holy Beings and Those-who-follow-each-other (Sun and Moon) when praying with a pipe. Vows to carry out the Sacrifice Dance were made by the Gros Ventres only to the Supreme Being; the sacrifices of property, the prayer-"sacrifices" of self-torture and fasting, and the chief verbalized and gesture prayers during the rite were likewise directed to him. Our informants consistently and insistently emphasized that the Gros Ventre Sacrifice Dance was, in this sense, a predominantly theistic ceremony.

While more generally the Sacrifice Dance was regarded as of lower ritual rank than the Flat and Feathered Pipe rites and as of higher rank than any of the other seven sacred Dances, there was some difference of view on the point among our informants. The Boy, who himself emphatically ranked Flat Pipe rite as far and away first in dignity of all Gros Ventre ceremonies, with the Feathered Pipe rite, Sacrifice Dance, and other dances following in this order of dignity, summed up the situation as follows:

"While the supreme religion of the Gros Ventres was the Flat

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Pipe, some individuals or whole bands would consider the Sacrifice Dance as greatest, would give first preference to the Sacrifice Dance as a means of worshiping the Supreme Being, or would think of the Sacrifice Dance and other Sacred Dances as supreme. Then there were other individuals and bands who would prefer to worship through the Pipe *and* the Sacrifice Dance, or through the Pipe *and* some other Sacred Lodge."

Among the reasons he and other informants gave for ranking the Flat Pipe rite above the Sacrifice Dance were the connection of the Pipe with the creation and history of the world and man, the donation of the Pipe by the Supreme Being, the rigidly determined and scrupulously observed ritual, the absence of all vulgar elements from the Pipe celebrations (as contrasted with some at least of the Sacred Dances). Reasons given for ranking the Sacrifice Dance above the other dances were that the Flat Pipe entered into active participation in the Sacrifice Dance and it alone entailed dire hardships in the way of self-torture, hunger and thirst.

The Sacrifice Dance was held only when some man had vowed it. A woman could not vow it, but, to judge from the story of First Singer, could vow to request a man to hold the Dance. A given man could vow to hold the dance as principal acter in it only once in his lifetime, but he could join the dance as an active associate participant a number of times. Once he had gone through it in fulfillment of a vow, he could serve as ceremonial grandfather on a later occasion to another who wanted to go through it.

The vow was made to the Supreme Being. In the story of First Singer, however, whether her vow was made to the Supreme Being or to the sun or to both is not clear.

If the vow were made in, say, midwinter, its fulfillment would be deferred until about June or when the spring vegetation was well advanced. In the meantime the vower might choose his grandfather and a crier, the formal public announcement of the vow might be made, and the preliminary four nights of singing might be gone through. Before the dance began this good-time singing, by men and women jointly, took place on four separate nights, not necessarily successive ones, but any nights during the preceding month or year. The fourth of these, however, had to